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ABSTRACT

In response to a federal mandate, the National Institute of Education conducted the Safe School Study which examined victimization by violence in schools as a major dependent variable, and included alienation and involvement measures among the independent variables as well as demographic, attitudinal, school, familial, and community characteristics. The data indicated that the proportion of junior high school students reporting attacks was about twice as great as that of senior high students. The risk of serious attack was greatest in urban areas. Those students who were fearful of attack, or who had been recently attacked reported staying home from school or avoiding school areas such as restrooms and certain sites within the school grounds. Fear was much more common in junior than senior high schools. Overall, the findings suggest a need to humanize the nation's schools by providing: (1) more personalized contact among students, teachers, and administrators; (2) smaller classes; (3) more collaborative decision-making procedures; (4) firm, fair, and consistent discipline; and (5) restructure of the grade composition of schools. (Author/PCN)

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A NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON ALIENATION, INVOLVEMENT, AND VICTIMIZATION IN SCHOOLS

by

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As a response to growing public concern over the extent of violence and vandalism in the public schools, the Ninety-third Congress mandated that HEW conduct a national study to determine the incidence and seriousness of school crime, the number and locations of schools affected, the costs, the means of prevention in use, and the effectiveness of those means. In response to the legislation, the National Institute of Education conducted a study which examined victimization by violence in schools as a major dependent variable and included alienation and involvement measures among the independent variables, along with a host of demographic, attitudinal, school, familial, and community characteristics. The Phase II data of the Safe School Study (to which I will be referring primarily) comprised a nationally representative cluster sample of 642 schools and included interview data from 6,283 students and questionnaire data from 31,373 students and 23,895 teachers.

The picture which emerged from the Safe School Study was not pretty. Neither did it reflect the horror often presented by the media. To give a few examples, an estimated 1.3% of secondary school students reported that they were attacked at school in a typical month, representing some 282,000 students. More than two-fifths of the attacks involved some injury, although most of the injuries were minor. Only 4% of the attacks involved injuries serious enough to require medical attention. The proportion of junior high school students reporting attacks was about twice as great as that of senior high students (2.1% vs. 1%). While the risk of minor attacks is about the same, regardless of location, the risk of serious attack is greater in urban areas than elsewhere.

An estimated one-half of 1% of all secondary students have something taken from them by force, weapons, or threats in a typical month, representing some 112,000 students. Eighty-nine percent of the robberies involved no injury to the victim; 11% involved some injury, but only 2% were serious enough to require a doctor's attention. The risks are again greater in junior than in senior highs, and greater in urban areas than elsewhere. While attacks, robberies, and shakedowns affect a large number of students each month, most are minor offenses. Still, their consequences in terms of personal fear and disruption of the educational process can be considerable.

Eighteen percent of the nation's secondary students reported that they were afraid that someone would hurt or bother them at school. Of those recently victimized, 56% concurred. While only 9% reported that they sometimes brought something to school with which to protect themselves, 29% of those recently victimized reported following that practice. As a preventative procedure, fully 33% of large-city junior high school students reported avoiding three or more sites in their school, typically, the restrooms, places on the school grounds, and other places inside the school building. Compounding this, 4% overall and 15% recently victimized reported staying home from school for fear of their own safety.

Clearly, no matter how sound the basic educational practices within a school, if students are afraid and thus not attending, little learning of an educational nature can occur. Fear, like victimization, is much more common in junior than senior highs. Unlike the victimization data, however, (where approximately two thirds of both victims and offenders are male), the fear data show some interesting differences. There are no differences between males and females recently victimized; with others, however, differences between the sexes occur. In both junior and senior highs, the female students

report considerably higher levels of fear and apprehensiveness (though lower levels of victimization). Fear is greater in urban areas, as is victimization by violence with junior highs again demonstrating higher levels of fear and avoidance.

Those who are the victims of violence, report having fewer close friends in school, poor relationships with parents, lower grades (including well below average reading levels), and higher failure and suspension and expulsion rates (roughly a 2:1 ratio, 22% vs. 11%). Given that those victimized report having fewer close friends and more difficulty in communicating with their parents, they are more liable to turn to a counselor or a teacher for help as opposed to the majority of students who would turn to a friend for assistance.

The alienation measures indicate that approximately twice as many victimized students don't like their shcool, the students, the principal, and their classes. Overall 9% of students nationwide report that they do not like their school, 3% do not like the students, 17% do not like the principal, and 10% do not like their classes. Even more importantly, 25% of students nationwide endorsed the statement "Every time I try to get ahead something or someone stops me." A full 41% of those recently victimized endorsed the same statement. This notion of learned helplessness pervades those victimized in the nation's schools. Widespread alienation acts as a significant predictor of victimization even holding other factors constant. The data suggest that alienated students tend to come from areas in which community crime rates, urbanization, and unemployment are high, and familial relations are poor.

Our data also suggest that the victims of assault and robbery may well be perpetrators, given that they are much more liable to affirm that if they felt that they would not get caught that they would be more likely than other students to spray paint on walls, steal from other students, cheat on tests,

and skip school. Interestingly enough, those victimized by violence are more likely to agree with such statements as "People who leave things around deserve it if their things get taken; Taking things from stores doesn't hurt anyone; People who get beat up usually asked for it; If you want to get ahead, you can't always be honest; and If students are in a fist fight, let them settle it by themselves." Clearly these issues must be sorted out, but the data regarding offenses committed by students were not collected since it was felt that such questions were too sensitive politically. In addition, motivation was not assessed (since it was not a major interest of the Congress), and most likely after a fist fight both individuals probably would have described themselves as victims.

Involvement, on the other hand, appears to be more diffusely related to victimization and alienation. Among students who report involvement in school clubs, student government, and other activities, victimization and alienation are lower, but they are higher among students who report participation in athletics, and band.

Involvement in the classroom is also related to victimization though no causal inferences are implied. Twnety-six percent of students victimized report that they are almost never taught what they want to learn, as opposed to 16% of the students nationwide. Particular classroom learning techniques seem to be related as well. Forty-five percent of those victimized stated that their teachers never allowed students to learn from one another in class, compared with 35% overall. Thirty-one percent of those victimized and 19% overall reported that it was not easy to have one's ideas listened to in class. Punitive grading practices and harsh authoritarian attitudes are predictors of violence against teachers. Perhaps when 13% of the students report that the teachers are almost never interested in the students (22% of those victimized) they are accurately reflecting the teacher's concerns.

That is supported by the fact that 16% of the teachers disagree or strongly disagree that they want to keep on teaching the kind of students they have now. Understandably, 38% of those recently victimized disagreed. In all fairness to our nation's teachers, however, certain school management practices contribute greatly to the level of victimization in a school. Highly affected schools tend to have more friction between all parties, particularly teachers and administrators, and a generally depersonalized school climate with large numbers of students per class and students per week. The image that emerges from the case studies of seriously affected schools is that of an overburdened principal buried behind a mountain of paperwork who rarely is able (or willing?) to get out into the halls, to get to know the students by name, and to administer discipline in a firm, fair, and consistent manner. Also, the students and teachers alike state that many principals are unwilling to share decision making. Clearly the administrations of schools appears to be an important key in turning around a troubled school; however, the reward and incentive structure for principals does not encourage the best ones to stay in the most highly affected schools.

What emerges is the necessity to humanize the nation's schools by providing for more personalized contact between students, teachers, and administrators alike, smaller classes, more collaborative rather than hierarchical decision making procedures, firm, fair, and consistent discipline, and restructuring the grade compositon of schools--either by encouraging a return to the K through 8 (or 1 through 8) grade school with a 4-year high school structure, or at least middle schools with comprehensive high schools. From all available data on violence in schools, I am personally convinced that the junior high structure should be abolished (though I realize that building considerations may make such changes difficult financially). Still, I believe that human welfare should take precedence.